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ABSTRACT

The social conflict approach, i.e., any social situation in which social entities are linked by antagonistic social relations, constitutes a viable conceptual framework for studying the family. Increasingly, conflict is viewed as a central characteristic of family life. The social conflict framework can be used to study both social phenomena associated with the family as well as levels of family analysis: intra-individual role conflict, conflicts between family members, different groups within a social stratification, family units and external groups, and the family institution and other segments of society. A single conflict event can be conceptualized in terms of the issue, actors, interaction processes, relational context, cultural context, physical setting, and consequences. The social conflict approach emphasizes a basic social force heretofore largely neglected in family sociology. (NRB)

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IN SEARCH OF THE "MISSING" CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK IN FAMILY SOCIOLOGY: THE SOCIAL CONFLICT FRAMEWORK*

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One of the most significant developments in the area of family theory has been the formulation and delineation of a number of distinct "conceptual frameworks," according to which the family can be studied sociologically. Defined by Hill, one of their originators, as "cluster(s) of interrelated, but not as yet interdefined, concepts for viewing the phenomenon of marriage and family behavior and for describing and classifying its parts" (1966: 11), each conceptual framework provides a broad, yet unique, picture of the family.

At the present time, five conceptual frameworks seem to be widely accepted and utilized by family sociologists. These are the following:

(1) the structural-functional conceptual framework, which views the family as an institution, and focuses upon the functions it performs for society and for its members (e.g., Hill and Hansen, 1960; Pitts, 1964; McIntyre, 1966).

(2) the symbolic interaction conceptual framework, which views the family as a social group, and focuses upon the patterns of interaction which take place within the family (e.g., Hill and Hansen, 1960; Stryker, 1964; Schvaneveldt, 1966).

(3) the developmental conceptual framework, which examines the family in terms of its "life cycle," and focuses upon how families change over time (e.g., Hill and Hansen, 1960; Hill and Rodgers, 1964; Rowe, 1966).

(4) the social exchange conceptual framework, which examines the family in terms of the exchange processes which take place among family members (e.g., Edwards, 1969; Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1976).

(5) the general systems conceptual framework, which studies the family as a social system, and focuses upon morphogenic processes within the family (e.g., Speer, 1970; Hill, 1971; Kantor and Lehr, 1975).

While each of these conceptual frameworks represents an important and unique approach to family study, when taken together they still leave an important area of omission. This is the study of the family according to the principles of social conflict theory. Despite the suggestion several years ago by Sprey (1969) that a family conflict framework would be of great benefit to family sociologists, such a framework has not really been developed since that time.

On the one hand, the concepts and assumptions of conflict theory <u>are</u> appearing to an increasing degree in the sociological study of the family. Further, many family sociologists are recognizing conflict to be an integral part of family life. However, this growing attention to conflict phenomena has not yet resulted in a systematic treatment of the conflict framework as a means of studying the family.

This paper attempts to fill this current gap in family theory by developing a social conflict framework for family study. Actually, our task will be primarily one of synthesis and reorganization, rather than one of generating new ideas. This task is facilitated by the

existance of three distinct types of literature which are valuable in delineating such a framework: (1) those treatments of family conflict which do exist (e.g., Blood, 1960; Bernard, 1964; Turner, 1970: 135-163; Foss, 1977), (2) "conflict" or "coercion" models in the most general sense (e.g., Marx and Engels, 1888; 1930; Dahrendorf, 1959; Collins, 1975), and (3) specific analyses of social conflict processes in various social contexts (e.g., Mack and Snyder, 1957; Boulding, 1962; Driesberg, 1973). These latter two sources, in particular, appear to have much to offer to the study of family conflict, and the failure of family sociologists to turn to these more general social conflict theories and models may be at least partially responsible for the relative non-development of the conflict approach in family sociology.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS TODAY

Before presenting this particular framework, however, it is necessary to pause for a moment and question the exact value of this endeavor as a contribution to family sociology. On the one hand, a number of authors have convincingly demonstrated how the identification and development of conceptual frameworks can benefit both theorization and research (Hill and Hansen, 1960; Hill, 1966; Nye and Berardo, 1966), and there seems little need to repeat these here.

However, two general questions do need to be addressed: (1) Is family sociology <u>still</u> at the "conceptual framework stage" of its development, and (2) Does family sociology need <u>still another</u> conceptual framework?

Beyond conceptual frameworks?

Because of the increased emphasis on "higher", more sophisticated levels of theory construction in sociology today, some might question the need for continued effort at the meta-theoretical level of conceptual frameworks, as opposed to working exclusively at the level of systematized sociological theory. Clearly, as Zetterberg (1965) has demonstrated, taxonomical description via conceptual frameworks and sociological theory are not the same thing. And certainly, the ultimate goal of sociology is the development of systematic social theory, not the continuous description and classification of concepts. However, we feel that the very fact that conceptual frameworks and social theory do perform very different functions in the study of the social world serves as a strong justification for the continued development of relevant conceptual frameworks.

First, many of the benefits which conceptual frameworks provide -- sepcificity of conceptualization, providing a frame of reference for the interpretation of data, codification of empirical research, etc. -- directly facilitate formal theory construction efforts.

And second, we must emphasize that the beneficial relationship between conceptual frameworks and social theory is not likely to be unidirectional in nature. Thus, conceptual frameworks should not be viewed only as building blocks which temporally precede "real" theory. Instead, there is likely to be a mutual interchange between the two, in which better conceptual development leads to more productive theorization, and improved theorization in turn produces clearer and more refined conceptualization. For example, we would expect that this sort of interchange has taken place between the

social exchange conceptual framework, on the one hand, and more formal middle-range exchange "theories," such as those of family power (Blood and Wolfe, 1960), sexual stratification (Collins, 1971), and socialization (Richer, 1968), on the other.

Thus, the time and effort devoted to identifying and refining conceptual frameworks does not detract from the goal of constructing good sociological theory; rather, it contributes strongly to that goal. And further, from a more general vantage point, one can take the view that both conceptual frameworks and formal theory facilitate reaching the over-riding goal of developing useful ways of organizing and representing our observations of families.

How many conceptual frameworks?

A second important issue is whether we should continue to pursue several different metatheoretical paths, or whether we ought to be developing what Hill has termed "an all-purpose general family framework" (1966: 23).

Presenting the issue in this way assumes that our ultimate goal is indeed to develop a single,unified theory of family behavior. However, one could argue that a single family reality does not exist, and thus, to seek a single theory of the family is to impose a unity which simply is not there. According to this view, conceptual frameworks are not just different perspectives on the family, (they are perspectives on different families). Whatever number of conceptual frameworks could provide unique insights into various aspects of family life would be justified.

However, even if one does adopt as a final goal one general

theory of the family, realistically such a goal is many years away. In the meantime, a necessary prelude to its attainment is the identification of all (or certainly a major portion of) the basic concepts and assumptions which will underlie the meaningful study of the family. If each conceptual framework can in fact afford us a distinct and unique means of looking at the family, then, as Broderick (1971: 153) has noted, it should be possible "to get a glimpse of the whole when these various perspectives are summed."

Thus, whether or not we seek an ultimate goal of one general theory of family life, family sociologists face a continuing responsibility to develop conceptual frameworks which can provide us with new stimulating and diverse perspectives on the family.

Why a social conflict framework?

To our way of thinking, in arguing for the efficacy of a particular conceptual framework, it is necessary to demonstrate three things -- (1) "appropriateness," (2) "uniqueness," and (3) "applicability."

First, with regard to appropriateness, it is important that a conceptual framework be able to capture some aspects of family reality. In other words, much like the concept of "face validity" used in sociological measurement, it is necessary that a conceptual framework make intuitive sense. Thus, for a social conflict framework to be useful and worthy of development, it is important to determine that social conflict is in some way an important aspect of family life.

Second, to insure its uniqueness, it should be possible to demonstrate that the conceptual framework in question emphasizes aspects of the family which are not subsumed by other existing frameworks. We do not mean that it is necessary that a conceptual framework be able to explain all of family behavior. Instead what is necessary is that a new framework be able to offer a unique and different way of looking at some important aspects of family life; in so doing, it will be producing something of substance not derivable from other frameworks.

Finally, however, for a conceptual framework to be of value, it should have at least a reasonably high degree of general applicability to the study of the family. As suggested above, this is a matter of degree; generally speaking, however, we might say that the more different types of situations to which a particular conceptual framework can be meaningfully applied, the greater the value of that framework for family sociologists.

We feel that the social conflict framework can be justified on all three of these counts, and the main body of this paper will be devoted to demonstrating why we feel this to be the case. We will begin by examining the appropriateness of this framework in the following section. In looking at this issue, a logical question which might be raised is, "If this framework is as applicable to the family as you are suggesting, then why has it not yet emerged?" To answer this question, we should take a short look at the "history" of conflict in the study of the family.

WHERE HAS FAMILY CONFLICT BEEN ALL THESE YEARS?

Until recent years, the study of social conflict has been

largely neglected in American sociology, and this has been especially true with regard to the sociological study of the family. Collins (1975: 225) nicely summarizes the reasons behind this resistance to the study of family conflict:

> "The family has always been regarded through a murk of sentimentality . . . .The sociology of family . . . has been the bastion of functionalism, framing its analysis against an ideal system in which men, women, and children all fit nicely in their places."

Within such an "idealized picture of the family" (Steinmetz and Straus, 1974: 6), with its heavy emphasis upon such "normal" family qualities as consensus, harmony and stability, it is difficult to recognize the possibility that conflict is an integral part of family life.

Where conflict has been dealt with by family sociologists, it has generally been in one of two ways, both of which are consistent with this idealized view of the family. First, one way of treating conflict has been to give it a highly negative connotation, in which it is seen as having disruptive consequences for the allegedly normal state of family equilibrium. Such a conception of conflict carries with it an implicit value judgment that more than a certain amount of conflict is undesirable, abnormal and unusual. "Healthy" and "normal" families will be characterized by conflict as a basic family process.

According to such a view, family conflict does exist and should be studied; however, the implicit goal of such study is to determine ways to elinimate, or at least control, family conflict.

Blood's treatment of family conflict (1960: 211) seems to be representative of this general perspective, as he states:

> "No society can afford to turn its back on family conflict. The family is too indispensable a unit of social structure and too necessary a means for the transmission of culture to the oncoming generation to be allowed to fall apart."

The second common treatment of family conflict has been to actually incorporate it into the functionalist approach. As Gelles and Straus (1974) have pointed out, conflict theory may be looked at either as an extension of functionalism, or as a conceptually distinct theory of social conflict. This functionalist version of conflict theory has been popularized by Simmel (1955) and Coser (1956; 1967), both of whom have suggested that conflict within the family, just like other forms of conflict, has positive benefits, either for individual family members, or for the larger family unit.

It is our position that, despite some basic similarities which it shares with structural-functionalism (van den Berghe, 1963; Sztompka, 1974: 168-178), the social conflict framework is much more than a mere extension of functionalism. In fact, it might not be overstating the case to suggest that the conflict framework represents the virtual antithesis of the consensus-functionalist approach. Whereas functionalism emphasizes social qualities such as stability, harmony and consensus, the social conflict framework emphasizes qualities such as conflict, and confrontation and change. And whereas the functionalist approach to conflict pretty much restricts itself to the question, "What are the consequences or functions

of conflict?", the social conflict framework goes much further than this in its analysis of conflict. In addition to the possible functions, and dysfunctions of conflict in the family, a general social conflict framework will ask: "How does conflict work?" "Why does it occur?" "Under what conditions does it exist?" "What processes does it involve?" And also, this framework will address itself to the question, "How, and under what conditions, do cooperation and consensus occur?"

The "discovery" of family conflict

Recent evidnece suggests that family sociologists are increasingly coming to recognize the utility and appropriateness of the social conflict framework for studying the family. For example, several recent family textbooks emphasizes the centrality of conflict processes in the family (Skolnick, 1973; Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1976). And on a smaller, but no less important, scale, elements of a broadly-conceived social conflict framework appear in the work of family scholars such as Charny (1969), Goode (1971), O'Brien (1971), Collins (1971: 1975) and Gelles and Straus (1974).

More systematic evidence of the recent increased use of the social conflict framework is provided in a recent article by Hays (1977), who found that, of a random sample of the Marriage and Family section of the American Sociological Association, 9% of the respondents claimed that they emphasized conflict theory as an approach in their teaching, while 14% said that they emphasized conflict theory as an approach in their research. The fact that this represents a recent growth in the popularity of this framework is indicated by the fact that less than 1% of these respondents claimed to have had an emphasis in conflict theory in their

own training.

A major reason for the growing popularity of the social conflict framework has been the fact that a number of family sociologists have begun to recognize the need to work toward what Skolnick and Skolnick have termed "the demystification of family life" (1974: 16). A central theme here has been a questioning of the necessity, and even the validity, of consensus-based, functionalist assumptions about the family as a well-integrated and harmonious social institution. For example, Sprey, in his initial call for a conflict approach to the study of the family, first rejects "the implication that stability, the fact of family continuity, is somehow normal and incompatible with the presence of conflict and disorder," and then adds that, "It is increasingly evident that equilibrium or harmony is not necessary for the continuation or stability of families" (1969: 699).

As this "myth of family consensus and harmony" (Steinmetz and Straus, 1974) has been questioned, there has developed a viewpoint which holds that conflict may indeed be a central characteristic of family life. In fact, as suggested by a number of family sociologists (Davis, 1940; Blood, 1960; Sprey, 1969; Foss, 1977), the family, both as a social group and institution, has unique structural characteristics which actually serve to increase both the frequency and the "normality" of conflict in the family setting.

Thus, the social conflict framework has been growing in popularity even in the absence of formal codification; in addition, it is an approach which seems to make good intuitive sense. We feel that explicit development of this framework is necessary, however, so that we may begin to take full advantage of the unique contributions which it has to make to the study of the family. Let

us now turn to a discussion of exactly what it is about the social conflict framework which provides a unique view of the family.

TOWARD A SOCIAL CONFLICT FRAMEWORK FOR FAMILY SOCIOLOGY

In this section of the paper, the main elements of a social conflict framework are presented. First, a "working definition" of the concept "social conflict" is presented. Second, the basic concepts and assumptions of the framework are delineated. Hopefully, this discussion will demonstrate that a social conflict approach meets the "uniqueness" requirement of a new conceptual framework. Third, the various "levels" of analysis to which the framework can be applied are discussed, with a view toward demonstrating the general "applicability" of this approach to family sociology.

What is social conflict?

Sociological concepts seem to have a way of increasing in complexity and diversity over time, as they come to be used by increasing numbers of social scientists. The concept of "social conflict" is certainly no exception to this sociological "rule." In an excellent review article, Fink (1968) demonstrates how this concept has been used to refer to (a) an objective situation (i.e., an underlying conflict of interests which produces antagonism between several parties), (b) a psychological state (i.e., feelings of hostility which often accompany such a conflict of interest, and (c) a specific type of interaction (i.e., behavior engaged in by those who find themselves involved in a conflict of interest).

As Fink points out very clearly, whichever referent is chosen by a particular conflict theorist will have a great impact upon the success of his/her theory, and more importantly, upon the degree to which several theories of conflict can be compared and contrasted.

Fink argues that "the aim of developing a general theory of social conflict can best be pursued if we adopt the broadest possible working definition of social conflict" (1968: 455-456). He then goes on to offer his own definition of social conflict: "any social situation or process in which two or more social entities are linked by at least one form of antagonistic social relations or at least one form of antagonistic interaction", (1968: 456).

Such a general definition of social conflict is consistent with our attempt in this paper to develop a general framework by which social phenomena can be studied. We are arguing here that the social conflict conceptual framework can have widespread applicability for the sociological study of the family. With this goal in mind, it hardly makes sense to argue, on the other hand, for a restrictive definition of the frameworks's central concept. Instead, we want a definition of social conflict which maximizes the utility and applicability of this approach. Fink's definition of social conflict identifies in general terms the central issue with which the concept is concerned; at the same time, however, it allows sociologists using the concept considerable room to operate in carrying out their own theorization and research.

Since we are arguing, at least for the present time, for such a broad and inclusive definition of "social conflict," it might be advantageous to briefly point out how this usage is likely to differ

from other definitions which commonly appear in the literature:

(a) "social conflict" is not distinguished from "competition"
(b) "social conflict" does not specify that any particular casual factors be in operation
(c) "social conflict" does not necessarily require a state of awareness on the part of the conflicting parties
(d) "social conflict" does not require that there be actual face-to-face interaction between conflicting parties
(e) "social conflict" does not require that there be an attempt to eliminate or injure one's opponent.

We should emphasize that our attempts to "sidestep" the conceptual pitfalls to which Fink has alerted us should not be taken to indicate that we do not see these issues as important. Instead, it reflects our desire to avoid becoming embroiled in termonological difficulty at this point. We would expect, however, that as the social conflict framework is developed and refined, these types of problems will come to be resolved.

Basic assumptions and concepts of the social conflict framework

The two basic elements in any conceptual framework are (1) the concepts which the approach utilizes in its study of the family, and (2) the assumptions about social reality which underlie the approach. At the present time, the social conflict framework is probably characterized by less conceptual development than the other five family frameworks cited earlier. On the other hand, however, the assumptions of the conflict framework are very different from those of the other frameworks, and this produces an

interesting and unique view of the family.

In this section of the paper, we will present the basic concepts and assumptions which appear to form the "backbone" of the social conflict framework. Assumptions are numbered, and are grouped into four categories: (1) assumptions about society, (2) assumptions about the nature of man, (3) assumptions about social interaction and social relationships, and (4) assumptions about the family. Important concepts are presented within the assumption statements, and are underlined the first time that they appear. The fact that our presentation simply takes the form of a set of statements containing central concepts, rather than a taxonomic presentation of concepts or a listing of important definitions, reflects our view that it is more important to gain a feeling for how the basic concepts of a framework are interrelated with each other within the total context of the framework are interrelated with each other within the total context of the framework, than to be able to categorize these concepts as "units of study," "conditions," "mechanisms," etc., or be confronted with long lists of definitions.

The nature of society. The social conflict framework makes a number of assumptions about the nature of society:

(1) Society does not naturally tend toward a state of equilibrium -- rather, the maintenance of consensus and conhesion are problematic.
(2) Social groups and social organization are held together by various types of constraint and coercion, rather than by a high degree of consensus among individuals.

(3) Groups and individuals within a society have differential access to resources and power.

(4) Because this differential access to resources and power results from one's position (or status) within a particular system of social stratification (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, sex) we can speak of these as structural inequalities.

(5) Given (3) and (4) above, social conflict is a natural and inevitable part of all social interaction and all social organization.

(6) Given (3), (4), and (5) above, society is not basically static. Rather, due to the constant presence of social conflict, it is subject to constant social change.

Thus, in contrast to the functionalist-consensus model of society, the conflict model assumes society to be marked by such characteristics as dissensus, coercion, exploitation, hostility, and change. It should be noted, however, that conflict theorists do not necessarily view these phenomena as the only characteristics of society. Indeed, even Dahrendorf, certainly one of the most important modern conflict theorists, states:

> "I do not intend to fall victim to the mistake of many structural-functional theorists and advance for the conflict model a claim to comprehensive and exclusive applicability. As far as I can see, we need for the explanation of social problems both the equilibrium and conflict models of society; . . . society has two faces of equal reality: One of stability, harmony, and consensus and one of change, conflict, and constraint." (1958: 127)

Thus, a social conflict framework does not preclude the possibility that a truly realistic picture of society must incorporate elements of both the consensus and conflict models (Eitzen, 1974: 5-31). It does, however, emphasize those processes and conditions which produce social conflict, and it is this emphasis which allows the conflict framework to present a unique view of social life.

The nature of man. Two basic assumptions which the social conflict framework makes regarding the nature of man are the following:

(7) The primary motivating force behind individual behavior is the desire to pursue one's personal needs, values, goals, and interests.

(8) An individual's goals, values and interests will largely be determined by his/her position (status) within the social structure, and the roles associated with that position.

Regarding this basic nature of man, there seems to exist an interesting difference of opinion between two "schools" of conflict theorists. On the one hand, there is a viewpoint that man is, by nature, aggressive, hostile and conflict-prone. Simmel seems to be characteristic of such a view, as he speaks of man's "abstract impulse to opposition" and his "a priori fighting instinct" (1955: 29). Also relevant here would be ethologists such Lorenz (1966), whose work has been used heavily by Sprey (1971) in his analyses of family conflict.

On the other hand, a more traditional Marxian view of human

nature would be likely to argue that there is nothing inherently aggressive about man. Rather, it is the present state of society which produces a combative nature. Presumably, if (or when) society changes, man's tendency to engage in conflict will also change.

This distinction is certainly relevant to the study of family conflict, particularly with regard to the attempt to locate the specific causal factors which produce it. If the tendency for conflict is inherent within the human species, structural and situational factors are naturally less important than if violence is actually the result of people's social environment.

The nature of social interaction and social relationships. Related ot its particular conceptions of society and man, the conflict framework has several basic assumptions regarding the nature of social interaction:

(9) It is to be expected that the needs, values, goals, and interests of individuals and groups within society will frequently be in conflict with those of other individuals or groups.

(10) The basic type of social interaction is not cooperation, motivated by consensus on basic norms and values -- rather, it is conflict and competition.

(11) Many social relationships are characterized by a power differential.

(12) In social relationships characterized by a power differential, social interaction will be likely to involve domination, oppression, and exploitation.

(13) Persons tend to seek positions of power and dominance; those in subordinate positions seek to gain power, or, at least, to free themselves from domination by others.

(14) A major portion of social interaction involves processes of bargaining and negotiation, as both parties attempt to pursue and advance their particular goals and interests.

(15) Situations of social conflict do not necessarily have to, but are capable of, producing hostile feelings and/or aggressive behavior on the part of the parties involved.

In analyzing the assumptions which the social conflict framework makes about social interaction and social relationships, it is perhaps necessary to discuss how these assumptions differ from those of the social exchange framework. We see this as necessary because many writers seem to make an implicit assumption that these two approaches are inextricably linked, in the sense that adoption of one necessarily implies adoption of the other (Collins, 1971; 1975: 228-258; Skolnick, 1973: 218-222; Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1976: 328-358).

At the basis of this view seems to be the belief that persons are naturally in a state of conflict with one another, and that it is through processes of social exchange that people are able to interact in cooperative social relationships. Thus, conflict and social exchange are viewed as representing two necessarily interrelated parts of one overall process.

It may, however, be more sound intuitively to view these as two separate processes which may at times complement each other, but which do not necessarily have to do so. Thus, the social exchange framework allows for, but does not require, the assumption that conflict is a natural condition of man's social life.

This framework specifies a set of interactional principles and processes which govern a substantial portion of man's social interaction regardless fo whether it derives from a situation of conflict or a situation of relative harmony.

According to this distinction, social exchange processes can be useful in helping to explain the causes and consequences of conflict in the family setting. However, there is no reason to expect that these will provide the only, or even the best, such explanation. Similarly, social conflict may, but does not necessarily have to, precede processes of social exchange.

The nature of family. In this section, some of the general assumptions about society, man and social interaction and social relations are applied to the family. In addition, some special implications of the social conflict framework for the family are noted.

(16) Like any other social organization or social group, the family does not naturally tend toward a state of equilibrium; rather, the maintenance of consensus and cohesion are problematic.

(17) Like any other social system, the family is a "system in conflict" (Sprey, 1969: 699). Social conflict and social change are natural parts of family life.

(18) Certain structural characteristics of families affect (a) the number of underlying conflicts of interest, (b) the degree of underlying hostility, and (c) the nature and extent of expressions of social conflict. The same structural characteristics do not necessarily have the

same effect on each of these aspects of conflict; thus, family conflict has a "paradoxical nature" (Foss, 1977).

(19) Conflict situations in the family can take the form of (a) opposing interests, (b) incompatible goals, (c) differing values, (d) discrepant role expectations, (e) structural inequalities, (f) a scarcity of resources, or (g) clashes of personality.

(20) Family members have differential access to resources and power.

(21) This differential access to resources and power results from differing positions in systems of social stratification, and can be called structural inequality.

(22) Due to its systems of stratification by sex and age, the family is, to a large extent, a "structure of dominance" (Collins, 1975: 225). The importance of age and sex stratification in the family distinguishes it from other social groups.

(23) Like any other social system, the family is largely integrated through coercion.

(24) A family member's position (status), both within society and within the family, helps determine his/her interests, goals, values, and needs.

(25) Expressions of conflict in families are usually of the mixed-motive variety, in that family members possess not only conflicting, competing interests, but also common, inter-related ones. Hence, destruction or elimination of the other party is usually not a goal.

(26) It is necessary to distinguish between (a) conflict

avoidance or prevention, (b) conflict regulation or management, and (c) conflict resolution.

(27) The absence of conflict expression within a particular family unit cannot be interpreted as implying the happiness and satisfaction of family members.

(28) Complete suppression of conflict is likely to have negative consequences for the family unit and/or its members.

(29) Each aspect of conflict can have both positive and negative consequences (functions) for its participants and for the larger social system.

These assumptions about the family provide what we feel to be a very different picture of the family than do the other existing conceptual frameworks. As stated earlier, this "uniqueness" of the social conflict framework is one of our major justifications for its development and use.

A final reason mentioned for developing this framework was its general "applicability." Let us now examine this aspect of the social conflict framework.

"Levels" of family conflict

To our way of thinking, the social conflict framework has wide applicability, and can be used to study a broad variety of social phenomena associated with the family. Keeping in mind our general working definition of social conflict, we suggest that the social conflict framework is adapted well to investigation of the family at both the macro- and micro- levels of social analysis. Thus, it can be used to study (a) the family as a social

system or institution in relation to the rest of society, on the one hand, as well as (b) the patterns and processes of social interaction within particular family units, on the other.

Specifically, we see the conflict framework as relevant to five "levels" of family analysis:

(1) Intra-individual role conflict. This level of family conflict refers to conflict taking place within one individual, as the result of contradictory demands being placed upon him/her by several roles. For example, a woman working outside the home may experience conflicting demands and expectations among her work and family roles. Or a man may experience a conflict between his children's demands that he take them on an afternoon outing (father role) and his wife's desire that they spend some time together as a couple (husband role), or even his aging parents' need for help with some household chore (son role). As indicated in these examples, this type of conflict can involve several family roles, or a clash between a family role and an extra-family role.

We realize that this may appear to be an unusual application of conflict theory. However, we feel that this application is justified, in that it is entirely consistent with this approach's basic assumption that social systems are not typically in a state of harmonious equilibrium.

(2) Interpersonal conflict between two or more family members. This level of family conflict is probably that which comes

to mind most readily when the term is used, and it is pretty much self-explanatory. It includes all types of conflict between several family members within a particular family unit, such as marital conflict, sibling conflict, and parent-child conflict.

(3) Conflict between different groups within a system of social stratification. The analysis of conflict between social classes, viewed as a macro-scopic phenomenon, has certainly been one of the major foundations of social conflict theory (Marx and Engels, 1888; 1930; Dahrendorf, 1959). Typically, this type of analysis has looked at various segments of society in economic terms, focusing upon conflict between those persons who possess wealth and power and those who do not. The relationship between these two broad groups has been portrayed as one of coercion, exploitation, and hostility.

Engels was perhaps the first to suggest that this type of analysis can be applied to the study of male-female relationships:

> "The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamian marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male" (1972: 75).

Much of the recent literature dealing with the issues of sex roles and sexism seems to be consistent with this type of analysis,

with a particularly good example of this usage of conflict theory being Collins' conflict-based "theory of sexual stratification" (1971; 1975: 228-258).

The study of unequal power relationships between the sexes seems to be particularly applicable to family sociology, since, as Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1976: 13) point out, the family represents "a potential battleground in which the exploiters and the exploited clash with one another," and a large part of the war between the sexes is fought within the context of the family.

Nor is this the only fruitful application of "class" conflict to the family. As Skolnick (1973: 355-394) indicates in her discussion of "generational politics," and Collins discusses in his discussion of age stratification and conflict (1975: 259-277), this type of conflict approach may also be very useful in developing a general theory of parent-child relations.

(4) Conflict between particular family units and some external individual, group or organization. It is possible for a family as a social system to be in conflict with other social institutions or social groups. For example, a family might find itself in conflict with the local educational system with regard to educational philosophy. Or the needs of a particular family in terms of family planning might come into conflict with the requirements of a particular segment of the religious institution.

Combining this type of family conflict with observations derived from the labeling perspective of deviant behavior, the

result would seem to be an especially fruitful means of studying much of what has typically been referred to as deviance in families. This would include a wide range of instances of "culture conflict," involving a family adhering to a set of subcultural norms and values which is at odds with the norms and values of the larger society. This might occur, for example, in the case of a family of recent immigrants to our country, or a single-parent family headed by a lesbian mother.

(5) Conflict between the family institution and some other segment of society. Moving to the purely macro-level of analysis, the functionalist-consensus model holds that the various parts of society are well-integrated, and operate smoothly within a state of equilibrium. The conflict model, on the other hand, maintains that the parts of society do not fit together smoothly. Rather, there exists various discrepancies and inconsistencies between the elements of social structure. It is our feeling that, although not usually thought of as social "conflict," such macro-level "strains" are consistent with, and can be studied within, the social conflict framework.

Applying this type of analysis to the study of the family, the family institution is viewed as a "system in conflict" with other systems, or institutions, of society. Thus, we might use the conflict framework to study the adverse effects of differential rates of social change within society upon the family institution. Or this type of conflict approach might be used by more "radical"

family sociologists, who argue that the family is an oppressive, or at least outdated, social institution.

Thus, in this final level of family conflict, we are focusing upon "conflict" between macro-level elements of social structure. Once again, we recognize that we have stretched our definition of conflict to encompass a wider range of phenomena than is generally the case. However, if this loss in conceptual specificity is compensated for by an increase in general applicability, it would seem that family sociology will have profited, not suffered, by using such a broad conception of social conflict.

COMPENENTS AND DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

We have several goals in this final section of the paper. The first of these is to "flesh out" the rather broad working definition of social conflict suggested earlier, by indicating more specifically and concretely the kinds of social phenomena which we see as included within it.

Our second goal is to identify dimensions of conflict which we believe to be of particular interest to family sociologists. This latter effort is addressed to the question, "Given the basic concepts and assumptions of a social conflict framework, what do we as family sociologists do now?" Hopefully, the dimensions of conflict outlined here represent some important variables in the study of families.

We have found it useful to conceptualize a single conflict "event" as consisting of a number of different component elements. These include (1) the conflict situation or issue, (2) the actors, (3) the interaction processes involved, (4) the relational con-

text, (5) the cultural context, (6) the physical setting, and (7) the consequences of the social conflict. Taken together, these elements of an event of social conflict are all included in our broad working definition of social conflict.

Some cautions about this discussion are in order. First, this is intended as a suggestive listing, not an exhaustive categorization, of types of family conflict. It is expected that these dimensions will be refined, weeded out, and added to. In particular, it will be noted that many of the dimensions suggested refer to some levels of family conflict (for example, conflict between several members of one family unit), but not to others (for example, intra-individual role conflict, or macro-level conflict focusing upon the family as an institution). Hopefully, this reflects the fact that these are the types of family conflict that have had the most work done on them, not the fact that these cannot be accommodated by the social conflict framework. Second, these aspects of social conflict are presented in the form of ideal types. They represent end-points on a continuum, not "either-or" categories. Further, it is likely that many specific instances of conflict will fall toward the middle of the two extremes on any dimension.

Finally, we do not see these various dimensions of social conflict as necessarily independent of each other or mutually exclusive. Rather, it is likely that some of them are interrelated, and even that certain dimensions cluster together. For example, it is likely that conflict which is opponent-centered will also tend to be expressive and hostile. However, this is a matter best determined through a program of research.

<u>The issue</u>

This element of an event or instance of social conflict is the objective" situation within which the actors are operating. Most simply, this aspect of social conflict refers to "what the conflict is about."

Realistic and nonrealistic conflict. Perhaps the most basic question which can be asked about any instance of conflict is whether there is in fact a real issue underlying the interaction sequence in which several actors are "conflicting" with one another. Coser (1956: 48-55) has used the terms "realistic" and "nonrealistic" conflict to refer to (a) conflict which serves as a functional means towards achieving a particular goal, and (b) conflict which serves as a means of tension release. We prefer to use the terms "instrumental" and "expressive" conflict to refer to this particular distinction between conflict as a means and conflict as an end in itself. However, we like the idea of retaining the terms realistic and nonrealistic conflict, and using them to refer to the general distinction between (a) conflict which has an "objective," "justifiable" cause, and (b) that which lacks such a valid basis, but rather results from such casual factors as "deflected hostility," historical tradition," and "ignorance and error" (Mack and Snyder, 1957: 219).

There are several possible problems with this distinction between realistic and nonrealistic conflict. One of these is that it may prove to be of much greater theoretical than empirical value, given the difficulty of "objectively" determining the "reality" of underlying conflict situations. For example, from one point of view, men and women might be viewed as being in a "real" situation of conflict over scarce resources. However, from

another point of view, conflict between the sexes might be seen as representing a false issue, obscuring the fact that the real common interests of both parties are in conflict with a third group -- those who control an economic system which creates this scarcity of resources.

Another problem with the term "nonrealistic" conflict is that it may be somewhat misleading. It should not be assumed that there is anything less "real" or important about the feelings or behavior of the participants in an instance of nonrealistic conflict. This idea refers only to the issue underlying a conflict event, and says nothing of the emotions or actions which follow.

Despite these difficulties, the distinction between realistic and nonrealistic conflict is important. This is because it underlines the logical possibility that two or more actors can be engaging in conflict, even when they seem to have no real conflicts of interest at stake, or when their actual conflicting interests have long since been elminated or reconciled.

Basic and nonbasic conflict. Another important distinction made by Coser is that between conflicts over the basis of consensus underlying a particular relationship, and conflicts taking place within, and guided by, this basic consensus (1956: 73-74). He refers to these as "basic" and "nonbasic" conflict. Essentially, this is a measure of the importance and centrality of the issues over which conflict is being waged.

Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1976: 353-354) have nicely demonstrated how this distinction is relevant to the situation of marital conflict. These authors point out that basic marital conflict in-

volves a questioning of "the rules of the game" which regulate "core family issues" -- issues such as sexual intercourse and the decision whether or not to have children. Nonbasic conflicts can also occur within these same general areas. However, the difference is that "underlying each of these secondary conflicts is an assumption that there is agreement as to the . . . core issue . . . (itself)" (Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1976: 354). And the implication here is that the issues of disagreement in non-basic conflict will be much less crucial to the continued existence of the relationship.

The actors

Every instance of social conflict requires that there be two entities or units between which there can exist some type of antagonistic relationship. Although, as discussed earlier, these "entities in conflict" can be "impersonal" social phenomena, such as role expectations or societal institutions, the dimensions which we have presently identified in conjunction with this aspect of the total conflict process are generally most applicable to situations in which the entities in conflict are people -- for example, several persons within a particular family unit in conflict with one another, several members of a family unit in conflict with someone outside the family, or one status group within families generally in conflict with another status group (e.g., wives versus husbands). This is because the actor dimensions to be discussed below refer primarily to the motivations, goals and feelings of the conflicting parties.

Manifest and latent conflict. Kriesberg makes an important distinction between (a) "manifest" conflict situations, in which "the parties (have) come to believe that they have imcompatible goals," and (b) those "situations which an observer assesses to be conflicting but which are not so assessed by partisans" (1973: 18). These situations he terms "latent" conflicts. For Kriesberg, awareness of the fact that incompatible goals exist is a central element of social conflict; latent conflict is not social conflict.

Although we disagree with Kriesberg that the awareness of the parties involved is a necessary condition of social conflict, we see great value in retaining this distinction between manifest and latent conflict. Certainly, in the family setting, several family members may be pursuing discrepant goals or interests in their relationship, with one, or perhaps both, of them not realizing that this is the case. It is entirely conceivable that their behavior in this instance would not reflect the fact that their situation is objectively one of the conflict.

Since the "realistic-nonrealistic" and manifest-latent" dimensions appear to represent comparable treatments of two different elements in the conflict process (i.e., the conflict situation, on the one hand, and the actors involved, on the other), it might be interesting to combine these dimensions of a contingency table, as follows:

Is there awareness (or the belief) that a conflict of interest exists?	Is this a situation of conflicting interests? YES	NO
YES	Realistic and Manifest Conflict	Unrealistic Conflict
NO	Latent Conflict	Non-Conflict

Most social conflict, as it is commonly conceived, rests in the upper-left-hand cell of the table. This conflict which as an objective basis, and whose existence is recognized and responded to by the antagonists.

Hostile and non-hostile conflict. This dimension simply refers to the feelings of the participants during the conflict process. There seems to be a natural tendency to assume that all conflict processes are characterized by hostile emotional states. While hostility may often be involved in farily conflict, there is no necessary connection. In addition, hostility is a matter of degree, and the amount of hostility involved in a particular instance of social conflict is likely to vary according to the issue involved and various situational and structural factors.

Object-centered and opponent-centered conflict. Fink (1968: 447-450) points out that the chief goal of the actors in a conflict process can be either (a) to gain a scarce resource or further one's

interests, or (b) to injur or destroy an opponent. The distinction between "competition" and "conflict" has frequently been used to differentiate these two different types of goal. Consistent with our general definition of social conflict, however, we prefer to treat these as two different dimensions of social conflict.

As stated earlier, it is to be expected that family members usually find themselves in a mixed-motive situation, and thus generally do not have as their goal the actual "elimination" or complete destruction of their opponent. However, as with the other dimensions under discussion here, the distinction between object-centered and opponent-centered conflict represents a matter of degree, and there can be little doubt that the intent in much family conflict is the injury, in one sense or another, of the person with whom the conflict is being waged.

The interaction process

Social conflict most often involves a process of interaction between the several entities who are experiencing a conflict of interest. The basic question which is of interest here is that of how the conflict is being carried out. Several dimensions seem to be relevant to this element of social conflict.

Instrumental and expressive conflict. As stated earlier, Coser has used the terms "realistic" and "nonrealistic" conflict to distinguish between conflict designed to achieve a certain goal which the actor desires, and conflict which serves as a means of releasing tension. We acknowledge the importance of this distinction,

but prefer to use the terms "instrumental" and "expressive" conflict to refer to it (Foss, 1977).

One point of clarification is perhaps necessary regarding this dimension of conflict. Foss (1977) notes that Coser's distinction between task-oriented and tension-releasing conflict seems to have variable referents. Thus, sometimes Coser is referring to the goal of the actor, sometimes to whether or not the actor's behavior functioned so as to resolve the issue (instrumental) or to release hostility (expressive), and sometimes to the way in which the conflict was carried out. Here the distinction will apply only to the latter usage. Thus, instrumental conflict refers to a task-oriented, "stick-to-the-issue" type of interaction, while expressive conflict refers to an emotional style of interaction.

Direct and indirect conflict. This dimension of social conflict has to do with whether the conflict is being carried out in a straightforward, face-to-face fashion, or whether more subtle, behind-the-scenes techniques are being used. Thus, for example, in an instance of marital conflict, we might seek to determine whether the couple are approaching the issue in question through direct negotiation with each other, or whether they are carrying out the conflict indirectly -- by influencing the preferences of the children in the family, or bringing other parties into the struggle.

Aggressive and non-aggressive conflict. As defined by Steinmetz and Straus (1974: 4), to be aggressive is "to do something which will injure another." Thus, just as the distinction between "object-centered" and "opponent-centered" conflict made earlier

refers to the goals or intent of the actors in a conflict situation, this distinction between "aggressive" and "non-aggressive" conflict refers to actual conflict behavior. Aggressive conflict is that which somehow "injures," either physicall or emotionally, one's adversary. That a substantial amount of family conflict is aggressive in nature is demonstrated by the frequency with which actual physical violence, perhaps the most "extreme" form of aggression, occurs within the family setting (Gelles and Straus, 1974).

It is perhaps necessary to note that, according to our usage, conflict is "aggressive" in any conflict situation in which a person is injured, regardless of whether that injury was intended. We would expect that, in most cases, "aggressive" conflict would also be "opponent-centered" conflict; however, this relationship is not a necessary one.

The relational context

Another important element in the process of social conflict is the relational context, or structure, within which the conflict is being carried out. While the conflict process can certainly change the enduring relationship between the antagonists, the nature of their existing relationship can likewise be a significant aspect of the conflict itself.

Institutionalized and non-institutionalized conflict. This dimension refers to the extent to which conflict as a style of relating or interacting is characteristic of the ongoing relation-

ship between actors. For example, when conflict is institutionalized in a marriage, it is incorporated into the very structure of the marital relationship "as a taken for granted aspect" of this relationship (Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1976: 465). The "conflict-habituated" marital relationship identified by Cuber and Haroff (1965: 44-46) would seem to be representative of institutionalized conflict.

To a large extent, institutionalized conflict is likely to be a form of non-realistic conflict, in that it is often not really waged over specific issues. Rather, it is merely "the thing to do" within a particular relational context.

The cultural context

Like any other social process, social conflict is likely to have a normative component. In examining the cultural context of conflict in the family, we are concerned with two sets of norms -- first, the norms of the overall culture or sub-culture, and second, the "family norms" which develop within particular families over time. In either case, the cultural context of social conflict involves standards for how conflict should and should not be waged within the family unit.

Rule-bound and anomic conflict. This dimension refers to the degree to which the actors in conflict do in fact have a set of guidelines which governs the carrying out of conflict. Thus, we can ask "Does this couple or family have a pre-existing set of rules as to how conflict should be carried out?" To the extent that such guidelines have been developed, we can say that conflict

in this family is rule-bound.

Legitimate and illegitimate conflict. Beyond the question of how much guidance exists in a relationship for engaging in conflict, there is the additional issue of whether the actors are actually operating within the guidelines that do exist. Conflict carried out within those guidelines can be called "legitimate," while conflict which violates those guidelines is "illegitimate."

The physical setting

Just as an event of social conflict will have a relational context and a cultural context, so too will it have a physical context as well. We do not have much to offer with regard to this component of family conflict at present, except to note that two aspects of the physical setting which might prove to be important in a conflict process are (a) the presence or absence of an observer or third-party (Hotaling, 1977) and (b) whether or not the actors themselves are actually in each other's physical presence during the conflict (for a discussion of the physical setting and aggression in the family, see Gelles, 1974).

Consequences of the conflict process

There can be little doubt that the occurence of conflict in the family setting can have major consequences, both for the family as a social system and for individual family members. Perhaps the broadest distinction which can be made here is between positive and negative consequences of conflict. As Simmel (1955) and Coser (1956) have suggested, social conflict within a social group such

as the family can have positive consequences. For example,

> "Conflict . . . (may be) seen as performing group-maintaining functions insofar as it regulates systems of relationships. It 'clears the air,' i.e., it eliminates the accumulation of blocked and balked hostile dispositions by allowing their free behavioral expression." (Coser, 1956: 39).

Beyond this broad distinction between "functional" and "dysfunctional" conflict, perhaps the most important thing to be remembered here is that, given our inclusive definition of social conflict, when we are speaking of the "consequences of conflict," we are actually including the possible outcomes of a number of different processes. There are several logical possibilities here. One of these is that a conflict of interest may not be perceived by the parties involved. This is demonstrated in the situation of latent conflict discussed earlier. A second possibility is that a conflict of interest will be "ignored," and various strategies of avoidance will be invoked as responses.

Two additional possibilities are suggested by Sprey's distinction between (a) conflict management and (b) conflict resolution. As Sprey states:

> " . . . Analytically speaking, conflict can be solved only through the elimination of one of the contending parties. Any given manifestation of family harmony must, therefore, be seen as a case of successful management rather than one of

resolution." (1969: 704).

To Sprey's way of thinking, it is uncommon that family conflict is actually "resolved;" instead, processes of conflict resolution are the most important response to family conflict. However, as Scanzoni and Scanzoni point out in a similar distinction which carries with it a very different shade of meaning, conflict resolution can be contrasted with conflict regulation. Here, the conflict is being "managed," yet it is being managed through coercion or force, and nothing is really being done to change the conflict situation.

The implication of all this is that, as presently conceived, family conflict is a complex procedure, and many of the necessary elements of this procedure have not yet been adequately defined. Thus, it is important that family sociologists be careful to recognize these types of distinctions in their own work. In addition, it is necessary that considerable future effort be devoted to this particular aspect of the conflict process.

CONCLUSION

Within this paper, we have argued that the social conflict approach constitutes a viable and important "conceptual framework" for studying the family. We have offered a working definition of social conflict, discussed the basic assumptions and central concepts of this framework, and demonstrated the levels of family life to which this approach might be particularly relevant. In addition, we have specified various dimensions of social conflict, which may be of special interest in family sociology. We will close the paper by briefly indicating what we see to be the major

strengths and weaknesses of this "new" conceptual framework.

One problem with the social conflict framework, when contrasted with the other five frameworks, is that it is not as extensively developed conceptually. In fact, the greatest limitation of the conflict framework as presented here is probably the fact that it consists much more of general assumptions and descriptions of important variables that one might wish to consider in specific analyses, than clearly defined and interrelated concepts. In order for this framework to be of the value prophesized in this paper, considerable conceptual development and clarification is essential in the future.

On the other side of the ledger, one of the greatest advantages of the social conflict framework is that it emphasizes a basic social force which heretofore has been largely neglected in family sociology. The fact that conflict might be a natural and inevitable part of family life should hardly be surprising, given the difficult tasks and responsibilities with which the modern family is entrusted, the particular pressures which it generates, its unique structural characteristics, and its intimate atmosphere. The social conflict framework allows us to investigate the relationship between conflict and the family from a number of different vantage points, and in so doing it provides us with a unique and significant perspective not derivable from the other existing frameworks. For this reason, it is to our advantage to pursue its further development and refinement.

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